

support for promises and threats so they could endure beyond his term in office. I urged him not to let the foreign policy of the most powerful Nation on Earth be reduced to an Etch A Sketch, starting from scratch every 4 years.

We don't often agree, but I was grateful to hear Chairman MENENDEZ concur this week that the "best guarantee of a sustainable, diplomatic agreement with Iran and the international community is to build one that garners bipartisan political support."

So look, I am still hopeful that President Biden will finally recognize how uninterested Tehran is in negotiating in good faith. It is certainly not too late to start heeding good advice. It is not too late to start ratcheting up the pressure on Tehran and imposing serious costs when its proxies dare to challenge the United States. It is not too late to try to craft a bipartisan approach to the Middle East. It is not too late to have a plan to contest Russian and Chinese influence in the Middle East. It is not too late to start nurturing the historic Abraham Accords and reassuring partners like Israel and the UAE that their engagement is backed by a rock-solid U.S. commitment.

A year ago, I said Iran was the biggest threat America and its partners faced in the Middle East. Unfortunately, a year of Biden administration foreign policy has made that even more true.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Republican whip.

Mr. THUNE. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that I be able to complete my remarks.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

UKRAINE

Mr. THUNE. Madam President, I rise today to speak on a topic of global importance and mounting urgency, and that is Russia's continued aggression toward Ukraine.

After months of shifting tens of thousands of troops and military equipment, some from its easternmost military district, Russia has built up a military presence around the northern, eastern, and southern flanks of Ukraine. Russia has also amassed forces in Belarus under the guise of joint military exercises.

Unfortunately, there are no indications that the situation with Ukraine and Russia has taken any steps toward deescalation. If anything, Ukraine and our European partners are beginning to accept the U.S. assessment that Russia's buildup is continuing on a trend to permit a well-resourced and supported attack in mid- to late February.

As the cost of his deployment adds up and the so-called exercises in Belarus come to an end on February 20, Vladimir Putin will reach a decision point. I say this not to provoke alarm but to emphasize that the United States and our security partners must do what we

can while we can. It is critical to demonstrate that there will be a unified response from the West, including when it comes to sanctions and providing military equipment to Ukraine, so that we send the message to Putin that an attack would be a severe miscalculation on his part.

Is an attack from Russia truly imminent?

Well, so far, Putin's demands are nonstarters. Russia demanded that NATO deny Ukraine or any other free nation in Eastern Europe the ability to join this defensive alliance. Russia also demanded that NATO revert to its 1997 posture and capabilities.

These aren't serious demands, and the administration rightly rejected both. Unfortunately, at this point, Putin would likely find it humiliating to back down from such a costly military buildup without getting any concessions from the West. Many fear that he has backed himself into a corner where he may feel like his best option is to attack, as disastrous as that would be.

Now, the Ukrainians will say: How can Russia start a war with Ukraine? We have been at war for 8 years.

That is a critical point to remember, particularly when Vladimir Putin and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov are accusing the United States and NATO of stoking tensions and assuming a threatening military posture.

Think about it: Russia has illegally occupied Crimea and backed separatist forces in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine for 8 years as of this month. Yet Russia has the temerity to call NATO, which is a defensive alliance, and Ukraine—a free country that wishes to join that defensive pact—the aggressors. I should add that this is not a case of NATO's moving east, as the Russians will claim, but of independent countries seeking, of their own volition, to cast off old, imperialist Soviet influence and align with the West.

Make no mistake about it. Russia is the aggressor here, and we know that Putin wants to destabilize an independent Ukraine and bring it back into Russia's sphere of influence, similar to what he has done with Belarus, and that includes making it unthinkable for Ukraine, Georgia, or any other nation to seek or join NATO.

There are many possible scenarios for a Russian attack, including an attempt by Russia to try to solidify control of eastern Ukraine, pick up territory along the coast, or connect a land bridge to Crimea. Any Russian attack would also surely include cyber and information operations—behavior which we have already seen. Russia could overwhelm Ukrainian defenses and strike command, control, and communications centers in an opening salvo before crossing the border, but its long-term course of action remains less certain.

Ukrainians of all ages are showing their renewed willingness to put up a fight and to determine their own fu-

ture, and Putin has to weigh any possible gains against the risk of high casualties or an insurgency.

Putin could also threaten Kyiv and try to force concessions elsewhere, but his calculus must already include the likely response of crippling sanctions and isolation, not to mention driving other nations like Sweden and Finland to align more closely with NATO.

There have also been reports that Putin, whether by military attack or his little green men, could seek to overthrow President Zelenskyy. Russia has, of course, denied the claim, but Putin would certainly prefer a puppet regime to that of President Zelenskyy.

The uncertainty surrounding what Putin could do does not lower the threat of a Russian attack on Ukraine. And the latest indicators suggest Russia is still pressing forward to prepare for an imminent attack. Reports show that Russia is moving blood supplies, medical materials, and more fuel tankers to its west and to Belarus. Blood supplies are especially not required for a so-called exercise with Belarus; they are meant for casualties.

We need to take these developments seriously, pursuing a diplomatic deescalation, while making sure Ukraine can put up a fight and that NATO is ready and able to defend against any direct Russian aggressions.

On the diplomatic side, the United States and Russia have traded negotiation letters. As I noted earlier, Vladimir Putin is demanding a ransom for Ukraine's safety—a permanent ban on Ukraine's inclusion in NATO—and demanding that NATO, a freely associating defensive alliance, take steps to weaken its own security. These aren't serious demands.

So with no resolution in sight, the United States and its allies continue to move security assistance to Ukraine, including ammunition, missiles, and rockets, while preparing to reinforce NATO troops in border states.

The Javelins and Stingers the West is sending Ukraine may do little to stop Russian long-range fires or airstrikes, but they could still impose a significant cost if Russia tries to hold significant territory, especially in urban areas. Ukrainians are prepared to put up a fight, and we should provide them with the arms that they need to dig in.

I hope the administration and the majority party will take this threat to Ukraine seriously, utilize any remaining levers of American influence to deter a renewed attack, and, if Putin proceeds, make him immediately realize that it was a miscalculation.

This will take coordinated, lethal military assistance and strong sanctions, including against the Nord Stream 2 Pipeline.

It will be critical that Democrats come to realize that Nord Stream 2 is one of Putin's top geopolitical priorities. When this administration waived sanctions on the pipeline, despite the overwhelming opinion that the pipeline will make Europe more reliant on—and

vulnerable to—Russian energy and will be an economic blow to Ukraine, Putin saw that he wouldn't be challenged.

This is a crisis of Putin's making, but we didn't get here overnight. Waiving sanctions in Nord Stream 2 is one of the many missed opportunities to signal strength against Putin. We first saw Russia amassing troops on Ukraine's border last April. Yet here we are, roughly 10 months later, scrambling to deliver lethal defensive military aid.

The Biden administration has been too slow to respond to the mounting crisis and is now playing catchup. Exhibit A is that the administration just this Monday named its pick to serve as Ambassador to Ukraine. Of all the times to have a top diplomat in a country to prove that we are taking its situation seriously and to coordinate assistance, this is it. This follows a year of the administration slow-rolling assistance to Ukraine and seemingly springing to action only after the United Kingdom and others began overtly equipping Ukraine.

It is essential that we present a credible threat to Putin, but, unfortunately, I think he has pegged our President as a benign counterpart. Putin can look at America and see an unpopular President as risk-averse and spinning his wheels on a polarizing and flailing domestic agenda, not to mention that he can look at President Biden's botched withdrawal from Afghanistan and the risk to our defense modernization efforts from another continuing resolution and conclude that Democrats and the President pose little threat to Russia's ambitions.

Given the Biden administration's record, I have concerns about the President's willingness to stand up to Russia, but I very much hope these concerns are unfounded. We simply cannot afford to fail in this situation.

This is Ukraine's fight, but the implications of an attack will go far beyond its borders. We cannot accept that one nation can simply attack and subjugate another. And we cannot be so naive to think that Russia would stop with an invasion of Ukraine. The bear would still be in the woods, and Putin would love nothing more than to challenge or break the credibility of NATO or the United States. We cannot accept that scenario or allow Russia to dictate our own security posture with respect to NATO.

The only way to reject that future is by standing with our partners and staring down Putin's open aggression. Shoring up our NATO presence and putting troops on high alert are steps in the right direction. I am sure Ukraine currently feels surrounded and outgunned, but we need to make clear to Ukraine and to Vladimir Putin that Ukraine is not alone; that the free nations of the West will stand with Ukraine against Russian aggression and that the United States will make good on its NATO commitments.

I yield the floor.

RECESS

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the Senate stands in recess until 12:30 p.m.

Thereupon, the Senate, at 11:06 a.m., recessed until 12:30 p.m. and reassembled when called to order by the Presiding Officer (Ms. SINEMA).

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR—Continued

CLOTURE MOTION

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Pursuant to rule XXII, the Chair lays before the Senate the pending cloture motion, which the clerk will state.

The bill clerk read as follows:

CLOTURE MOTION

We, the undersigned Senators, in accordance with the provisions of rule XXII of the Standing Rules of the Senate, do hereby move to bring to a close debate on the nomination of Executive Calendar No. 496, Alexandra Baker, of New Jersey, to be a Deputy Under Secretary of Defense.

Charles E. Schumer, Jack Reed, Richard Blumenthal, Catherine Cortez Masto, Sheldon Whitehouse, Richard J. Durbin, Jacky Rosen, Margaret Wood Hassan, Mark Kelly, Benjamin L. Cardin, Brian Schatz, Debbie Stabenow, Angus S. King, Jr., Patrick J. Leahy, Martin Heinrich, Tim Kaine, Gary C. Peters, Chris Van Hollen.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. By unanimous consent, the mandatory quorum call has been waived.

The question is, Is it the sense of the Senate that debate on the nomination of Alexandra Baker, of New Jersey, to be a Deputy Under Secretary of Defense, shall be brought to a close?

The yeas and nays are mandatory under the rule.

The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk called the roll.

Mr. DURBIN. I announce that the Senator from New York (Mrs. GILLIBRAND), the Senator from New Mexico (Mr. LUJÁN), and the Senator from Vermont (Mr. SANDERS) are necessarily absent.

Mr. THUNE. The following Senators are necessarily absent: the Senator from North Dakota (Mr. CRAMER), the Senator from Montana (Mr. DAINES), and the Senator from North Dakota (Mr. HOEVEN).

The yeas and nays resulted—yeas 70, nays 24, as follows:

[Rollcall Vote No. 33 Ex.]

YEAS—70

Baldwin	Graham	Murkowski
Bennet	Grassley	Murphy
Blumenthal	Hassan	Murray
Blunt	Heinrich	Ossoff
Booker	Hickenlooper	Padilla
Brown	Hirono	Peters
Burr	Hyde-Smith	Portman
Cantwell	Inhofe	Reed
Capito	Kaine	Risch
Cardin	Kelly	Rosen
Carper	Kennedy	Rounds
Casey	King	Sasse
Collins	Klobuchar	Schumer
Coons	Leahy	Shaheen
Cornyn	Lee	Shelby
Cortez Masto	Manchin	Sinema
Crapo	Markey	Smith
Duckworth	McConnell	Stabenow
Durbin	Menendez	Sullivan
Feinstein	Merkley	Tester

Thune
Tillis
Van Hollen
Warner

Warnock
Warren
Whitehouse
Wicker

Wyden
Young

NAYS—24

Barrasso
Blackburn
Boozman
Braun
Cassidy
Cotton
Cruz
Ernst

Fischer
Hagerty
Hawley
Johnson
Lankford
Lummis
Marshall
Moran

Paul
Romney
Rubio
Schatz
Scott (FL)
Scott (SC)
Toomey
Tuberville

NOT VOTING—6

Cramer
Daines

Gillibrand
Hoeven

Luján
Sanders

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. KING). On this vote, the yeas are 70, the nays are 24.

The motion is agreed to.

CLOTURE MOTION

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Pursuant to rule XXII, the Chair lays before the Senate the pending cloture motion, which the clerk will state.

The bill clerk read as follows:

CLOTURE MOTION

We, the undersigned Senators, in accordance with the provisions of rule XXII of the Standing Rules of the Senate, do hereby move to bring to a close debate on the nomination of Executive Calendar No. 673, Reta Jo Lewis, of Georgia, to be President of the Export-Import Bank of the United States for a term expiring January 20, 2025.

Charles E. Schumer, Sherrod Brown, Christopher Murphy, Jeff Merkley, Jack Reed, Ben Ray Luján, Christopher A. Coons, Chris Van Hollen, Benjamin L. Cardin, Amy Klobuchar, Tammy Baldwin, Tim Kaine, Patrick J. Leahy, Jeanne Shaheen, Edward J. Markey, Debbie Stabenow, Martin Heinrich.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. By unanimous consent, the mandatory quorum call has been waived.

The question is, Is it the sense of the Senate that debate on the nomination of Reta Jo Lewis, of Georgia, to be President of the Export-Import Bank of the United States for a term expiring January 20, 2025, shall be brought to a close?

The yeas and nays are mandatory under the rule.

The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk called the roll.

Mr. DURBIN. I announce that the Senator from New York (Mrs. GILLIBRAND) and the Senator from New Mexico (Mr. LUJÁN), are necessarily absent.

Mr. THUNE. The following Senators are necessarily absent: the Senator from North Carolina (Mr. BURR), the Senator from North Dakota (Mr. CRAMER), the Senator from Montana (Mr. DAINES), the Senator from South Carolina (Mr. GRAHAM), and the Senator from North Dakota (Mr. HOEVEN).

Further, if present and voting, the Senator from South Carolina (Mr. GRAHAM) would have voted "yea" and the Senator from North Dakota (Mr. HOEVEN) would have voted "nay."

The yeas and nays resulted—yeas 54, nays 39, as follows: